

## America's Roadblock to Peace in the Middle East

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January 9, 2014



Secretary of State John Kerry has worked indefatigably for some five months now to steer Israel and Palestine toward a peace agreement, but progress has been sluggish at best and stagnant at worst. As evidence of the slow pace of the talks, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat recently signaled that he would be willing to extend negotiations beyond the designated 9-month period. The extension was subject to an April 29th deadline where the two parties could sign, "an initial framework agreement," that would, "specify the borders, percentage of land swaps, security arrangements, Jerusalem status, refugees," and other core issues. Although Erekat has since retracted this idea, he is to be commended for his flexibility. Still, considering that in earlier rounds of negotiations, notably between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2007, the two sides had made substantial progress, the slow pace of the current talks deserves closer scrutiny.



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Who benefits most from dragging out the talks? Not the Palestinian Authority (PA). The PA is eager for the negotiations to succeed in establishing a bona fide state of Palestine. Delays in the talks serve to harm President Mahmoud Abbas's credibility, in the face of continual challenges from Hamas for the allegiance of the Palestinian people. Abbas has staked his government on the promise of attaining Palestinian statehood by negotiations and diplomacy, and any sign that he is failing to deliver on that promise will strengthen the extremists in Hamas who have argued for years that Israel cannot be trusted as a negotiating partner and independence can be gained only through armed struggle.

On the other hand, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could well see benefit in stalling. His governing coalition includes a large bloc of pro-settler Knesset members in the Likud Party and in Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home Party, who advocate that Israel summarily annexed much of the West Bank, a territory they refer to as, "Judea and Samaria." In their view, the major Palestinian population centers should become small enclaves within Israel, tightly patrolled by the IDF.

Although Netanyahu does not publicly support their position, their strength in the coalition can be measured by the announcements of new settlements at every turn in the negotiating process. Every time there is a prisoner release, Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, a strong proponent of settlements, has issued permits for construction of hundreds of new housing units east of the Green Line. One can surmise that these pro-settler members of Netanyahu's coalition would not be promoting new settlement construction if they expected that in five months Israel would sign a peace agreement having borders that placed many of those settlements within Palestine.

But what is Netanyahu's view? Only a few days before Ya'alon's most recent announcement of new settlement construction, Netanyahu had huddled with the members of his cabinet and, in an effort to

cement a unified front, told them "he cannot accept repeated insubordination in the coalition." One can assume that Netanyahu does not view Ya'alon to be insubordinate.

Despite Netanyahu's public support for Kerry's efforts to negotiate an agreement, it often seems that he would rather avoid that outcome. His way of managing the situation could be to drag the talks out as long as possible. To satisfy the United States, he appears to cooperate with the April 29th deadline for an agreement, only to steer matters to a limited framework that leaves many details unresolved. That way, the negotiations will drag on at least through September 2014, long enough to forestall the Palestinians from going to the UN and mounting their bid for statehood during the 2014-2015 session. This will effectively push the "peace process" into 2015.

What would be gained by prolonging the process in this way? Netanyahu may be gambling that as time goes by the Palestinians will lose patience and initiate a new intifada with violent attacks, which will diminish any sympathy the world community now holds for the long-suffering Palestinians. Then there will be some teeth to Israel's perpetual argument that the Palestinians cannot be trusted to have their own state. Meanwhile, the new settlements will become established as "facts on the ground."

Behind Netanyahu's reluctance to grant the Palestinians a state is fear, fear born of the Jewish experience in the Holocaust and reinforced in Israel's fight for independence in 1948 that the world will always be against the Jewish people. Netanyahu learned this point of view under the tutelage of his father Ben-Zion. It is this attitude, that Arabs are not to be trusted and Israelis live in a rough neighborhood with no one to rely on but themselves, that it gave impetus in the 1970s and 1980s to a systematic program of settlement construction throughout the West Bank, justified in the name of national security. But a fortress mentality is only of limited usefulness; every fortress in history has fallen to the ground sooner or later, the 40-plus years of Israel's military dominance notwithstanding.

It is good to be reminded that there is more to Israel than settlement blocs, religious and Zionist fundamentalists, and muscular right-wing politics. The small country is comprised of organized labor, African immigrants, disillusioned young people who have taken to the streets, academics who teach at world-class universities, and professionals who are struggling to maintain their middle-class status in a shrinking economy: that Israel is as much Tel Aviv as Jerusalem. There are Israeli leaders who speak for these populations: Yair Lapid, Tzipi Livni, and the newly elected Labor head Isaac Herzog. These leaders are looking for a warm peace, cemented by the human ties of trade and economic development that can bring prosperity to a free Palestine. They can see Israel and Palestine standing together in alignment with moderate Arab states in the fight against Islamic extremism, believing that Israel can do better by opening its hands to its Arab cousins, the descendants of Ishmael and of the same father, Abraham.

One would have hoped that by now, Israelis and Palestinians who sincerely want a peace agreement to work would be setting up all sorts of informal bilateral meetings in order to build trust and confidence between the two sides. This sort of communication would help to overcome fear bred from suspicion, which escalate in the absence of dialogue and direct contact. Discussions about the details including border issues (including security policies), transportation routes, and the legal rights of Israeli settlers who find their homes under Palestinian sovereignty are key to a successful agreement. Instead, the current Israeli government has been dragging its feet. If it stays true to form, it will make every effort to frustrate a final agreement. In this regard, talk of reaching only a "framework agreement" by April 29 may serve to open the door to further delaying tactics. It is entirely possible that Israel will attempt to insert language into the framework agreement that in its imprecision creates a welter of conflicting interpretations, making further negotiations extremely challenging. And it is predictable that Israel will use settlement building as a lever to extract additional concessions from the Palestinians.

Secretary of State Kerry should be advised not to indulge Israel in this matter. He must avoid the temptation to play into Israel's hands. He should not sell the Palestinians on a false agenda, one that instead of bringing peace will cement and perpetuate Israeli dominance. Sooner or later the Palestinians will see the futility of their position, and the consequences will blow up in Kerry's face and bloody America's nose before the Arab world. To avoid this unfortunate outcome, Kerry needs to demonstrate to the Arab world that he is taking their viewpoint into account by holding Netanyahu's feet to the fire and reminding him that the United States expects nothing less of Israel than to negotiate in good faith.